

Environmental Management Systems/ISO 14001 - Frequently Asked Questions

1. What are ISO, ISO 14000, and ISO 14001?

ISO stands for the International Organization for Standardization, located in Geneva, Switzerland. ISO promotes the development and implementation of voluntary international standards, both for particular products and for environmental management issues. ISO 14000 refers to a series of voluntary standards in the environmental field under development by ISO. Included in the ISO 14000 series are the ISO 14001 EMS Standard and other standards in fields such as environmental auditing, environmental performance evaluation, environmental labeling, and life-cycle assessment. The EMS and auditing standards are now final. The others are in various stages of development.

2. How are these standards developed?

All the ISO standards are developed through a voluntary, consensus-based approach. Each member country of ISO develops its position on the standards and these positions are then negotiated with other member countries. Draft versions of the standards are sent out for formal written comment and each country casts its official vote on the drafts at the appropriate stage of the process. Within each country, various types of organizations can and do participate in the process including industry, government (Federal and State), and other interested parties, including various non-government organizations (NGOs). For example, EPA and States participated in the development of the ISO 14001 standard and are now evaluating its usefulness through a variety of pilot projects.

3. What must a community do to have an EMS that meets the ISO 14001 standard?

The ISO 14001 standard requires that a community or organization put in place and implement a series of practices and procedures that, when taken together, result in an environmental management system. ISO 14001 is not a technical standard and as such does not in any way replace technical requirements embodied in statutes or regulations. It also does not set prescribed standards of performance for organizations. The major requirements of an EMS under ISO 14001 include:

- A policy statement which includes commitments to prevention of pollution, continual improvement of the EMS leading to improvements in overall environmental performance, and compliance with all applicable statutory and regulatory requirements.
- Identification of all aspects of the community organization's activities, products, and services that could have a significant impact on the environment, including those that are not regulated
- Setting performance objectives and targets for the management system which link back to the three commitments established in the community or organization's policy (i.e. prevention of pollution, continual improvement, and compliance)
- Implementing the EMS to meet these objectives. This includes activities like training of employees, establishing work instructions and practices, and establishing the actual metrics by which the objectives and targets will be measured.
- Establishing a program to periodically audit the operation of the EMS
- Checking and taking corrective and preventive actions when deviations from the EMS occur, including periodically evaluating the organization's compliance with applicable regulatory requirements.
- Undertaking periodic reviews of the EMS by top management to ensure its continuing performance and making adjustments to it, as necessary.

4. Is an EMS Under ISO 14001 Relevant to Communities?

Yes. Because ISO 14001 is essentially a system designed to help communities and other types of organizations meet their environmental obligations and reduce the impact of their operations on the environment, it is relevant to all types of organizations. Counties, municipalities, towns, and townships typically oversee a number of separate facilities and operations. EMSs can be used as a framework to help these operations improve their environmental performance and make greater use of pollution prevention approaches. Use of the standard by counties is not well established at this point, but some are beginning to use it. For example, Washtenaw County, Michigan is implementing an EMS based on 14001 for its Sheriff's Department and participated in an earlier series of demonstration projects funded by EPA. EPA now wants to expand this approach and work with additional counties and municipalities.

5. What are some of the potential benefits of an EMS based on ISO 14001?

- Improvements in overall environmental performance and compliance
- Provide a framework for using pollution prevention practices to meet EMS objectives
- Increased efficiency and potential cost savings when managing environmental obligations
- Promote predictability and consistency in managing environmental obligations
- More effective targeting of scarce environmental management resources
- Enhance public posture with outside stakeholders

6. Can existing environmental management activities be integrated into the EMS under 14001?

Yes. The standard is flexible and does not require organizations to necessarily "retool" their existing activities. The standard establishes a management framework by which an organizations' impacts on the environment can be systematically identified and reduced. For example, many organizations, including counties and municipalities, have active and effective pollution prevention activities underway. These could be incorporated into the overall EMS under ISO 14001.

7. Why is the U.S. EPA interested in promoting and testing EMSs under ISO 14001?

Like a number of States, EPA believes EMSs, if implemented properly, could serve as a valuable tool to help organizations improve their environmental performance, increase the use of pollution prevention, and improve compliance. However, this premise needs to be evaluated closely, working with a variety of organizations, including those in the public sector. EMSs could, in the future, serve as the basis for providing regulatory flexibility to organizations that successfully implement them.

8. How is the demonstration program for counties and municipalities actually working?

EPA's Office of Water and Office of Compliance are working with a non-profit organization with expertise in EMSs and ISO 14001, to provide training and ongoing technical assistance to counties and municipalities selected to participate in the demonstration projects. Participating organizations are also receiving a variety of written and electronic materials to assist them as they put place their EMSs, using ISO 14001 as a baseline. Periodic meetings of the participants will be held to compare progress, share and discuss problems and issues, and gain greater understanding of specific parts of the 14001 standard. Between meetings, participants will receive assistance and advice on-line, through additional written materials, and through other means as they put their EMS in place.

The period of the demonstration program would be approximately 2 years concluding in September 1999.. EPA hopes that all participants will be able to have all of the elements of an EMS in place at the end of this two year period. A final report on the project, including short case studies on each participating organization will be prepared at the end of the project and given to the participants. Finally, participating organizations will be asked to collect and share common sets of data related to the establishment and implementation of their EMS. EPA will work with the participants to reach agreement on these data sets.

For further questions, please contact Jim Horne at the U.S EPA at (202) 260-5802 or Faith Leavitt at the Global Environment and Technology Foundation at (703) 750-6401.